New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1950

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1950 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

1949 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
Caesar and Cleopatra	193
Clutterbuck	205
*Death of a Salesman	358
Detective Story	330
Diamond Lil	369
Father (The)	223
*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes	198
I Know My Love	233
Lost in the Stars	241
Miss Liberty	279
Rat Race (The)	190
*South Pacific	312
Texas, Li'l Darlin'	214
That Lady	217
Touch and Go	250
Velvet Glove (The)	185

•

1948 Vol.

As the Girls Go	159
*Kiss Me, Kate	91
Lend an Ear	122
Madwoman of Chaillot (The)	104
*Mister Roberts	338
Where's Charley?	197

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of September 25, 1950*

1950 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres During 1950

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
Alive and Kicking	390
All You Need Is One Good Break	352
Arms and the Girl	356
As You Like It	367
Bird Cage (The)	341
*Cocktail Party (The)	376
Come Back, Little Sheba	348
*Consul (The)	329
Cry of the Peacock	316
Dance Me a Song	380
*Daphne Laureola	272
Design for a Stained Glass Window	373
Devil's Disciple (The)	344
Enchanted (The)	387
Freight	303
Great To Be Alive!	324
Happy As Larry	394
*Happy Time (The)	370
Innocents (The)	359
Julius Caesar	288
Katherine Dunham and Her Company	309
Liar (The)	296
Live Wire (The)	277
Man (The)	384
*Medium (The)	280
*Member of the Wedding (The)	397
Mr. Barry's Etchings	362
Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep	336
*Peep Show	285
*Peter Pan	306
Phoenix Too Frequant (A)	303
Show-Off (The)	292
*Telephone (The)	280
*Tickets, Please!	300
Tobacco Road	333
Wisteria Trees (The)	320
With a Silk Thread	314

CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD 312

Theatre Openings

"Daphne Laureola"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of September 25, 1950*

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Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Daphne Laureola"

New York World-Telegram
and
The ~~Evening~~ Sun

September 19, 1950

Security-Seeking Keynotes 'Daphne'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Placid comedy.

Topic—Love at 50.

Mood—Whimsical.

Star—Luminous, winning.

General—A letdown; oversold.

In the new season's first contender, "Daphne Laureola," Dame Edith Evans is playing a brandied old peach of 50 who, like the mythological Daphne, spurns passion for security. James Bridie's play at the Music Box skims around a provocative character, but never gives Miss Evans a hearty fistful of colors to paint out her portrait.

Far too much time is spent on the garrulous and pallid nonentities among whom the leading figure mistakenly seeks to cure her loneliness.

This Lady Pitts is a woman of intellectual distinction for which the world has had no colorful use. A humdrum life has wound up with her marriage to a Peer some 33 years her senior. Safety, boredom and loneliness have produced a breakdown and still invite her on periodic binges.

Misses Adventure.

Out slugging herself on double brandies, she meets a humorless, sensitive, passionate young Pole, who falls violently in love with her. Here is the adventure she has missed all her life. And instead of grabbing it, she turns, on her husband's death, to a sure continuation of the necessary security that has plagued her existence.

The chief trouble with Lady Pitts is that she is too unlike Candida. As Mr. Bridie has written her, she is entertainingly mad in the sense that alcoholic indulgence and bemused remorse can spell entertainment. But she has no particular charm.

In all truth she is pretty drab, and hardly excites even much pity. It is miraculous that Miss Evans, through her warm, intuitive playing and her glowing geniality can give the impression of impersonating a woman of great fascination.

Genuine Emotion.

The most interesting relationship of the play is that of Lady Pitts' with her 83-year-old husband. Her fondness for him is the only genuine, positive emotion she ever shows, despite their patently businesslike association. It is too little dwelt upon.

By comparison, the young Polish suitor's advances are pretty dull.

A great attribute of the play is the performance of Cecil Parker, costarring with Miss Evans, as Sir Joseph Pitts. He could not get wiser or in more of a rut if he lived to be a thousand, and Mr. Parker makes his stuffiness vastly winning.

John Van Dreelen effectively negotiates the unreasoning passions of the young lover, who punctuates his outbursts with fainting spells. Ernest Jay is relentless as an unspeakably officious bore.

Actors' Play.

Talkiness and a downhill course militate against the play's fulfilling its rumored promise.

Certainly it is an actors' play, in that it both challenges them and gives them leeway in characterization. It is complete fascination, for instance, to watch Miss Evans' first act, which is a protracted drunk scene.

Instead of putting on a flash act with mugging and tricks, she ekes flamboyance and heartache out of the babbling lines, to depict a good soul in a torment of frustration.

"DAPHNE LAUREOLA"

Comedy by James Bridie; staged by Murray Macdonald; decor by Roger Furse and Roger Ramsdell; lighting by Ralph Alswang; presented by Leland Hayward and Herman Shumlin, in association with Sir Laurence Olivier, at the Music Box Theatre, September 18, 1950. The cast:

Maisie MacArthur..Joyce Linden
Bill Wishforth.....Robin Lloyd
Helen Willis.....Eileen O'Hara
Bob Kentish..Alexander Harris
George.....Martin Miller
Lady Pitts.....Edith Evans
Ernest Piaste..John Van Dreelen
A Bored Woman.....
Elizabeth Ashley
A Bored Man.....Ireland Wood
Mr. Gooch.....Ernest Jay
Mr. Watson.....Mark Stone
Vincent.....Peter Williams
Sir Joseph Pitts..Cecil Parker
Manager of Le Toit aux Porcs..
Terence Owen

Synopsis: Act I. Le Toit aux Porcs, a London restaurant. Evening. Act II. Scene 1. A summer house in Hampstead. Scene 2. The same. A week later. Act III. Le Toit aux Porcs. Six months later.

DAILY NEWS

September 19, 1950

'Daphne Laureola' Mildly Funny; Its Star, Edith Evans, Is Grand

By JOHN CHAPMAN

All was chummy as a new theatrical season began last evening with the presentation of an English comedy, "Daphne Laureola," at the Music Box. Good-will abounded as the sidewalk crowds ogled the first-nighters, the first-nighters ogled each other, the charity workers nuzzled up with their tin cans and gentle words and an importation starring no less than a Dame was played in one of the nicest theatres in town. My own good-will was such that I truly admired the performances of Dame Edith Evans and her co-star, Cecil Parker, and it even led me into liking James Bridie's comedy pretty well.

But, to alter a comment Tallulah Bankhead once made, there is less to "Daphne Laureola" than meets the ear. It is gently funny and it touches the emotions once or twice, but it also runs to quite a number of words as it presents a little story which is part G. B. Shaw's "Candida" and part T. S. Eliot's "The Cocktail Party." Last evening's audience, which was quite a glittering one, voiced many cheers for Miss Evans and Mr. Parker, and a Yale professor was heard to holler "Brava!" at the lady.

And So to Soho.

Mr. Bridie tells in his play of Lady Pitts, a woman of 50, who is married to a wealthy coot of 80 and likes to get drunk once in a while all by herself in little restaurants in Soho. In one of these places at one of these times she impresses a highly poetic Polish youth, who is given to fainting when he becomes emotional.

This Lady Pitts is nothing special, having been just an ordinary working girl before Sir Joseph Pitts bought her with marriage, but to the boy she is a woman to be pursued by the gods alone. She is, in fact, the Daphne whom Apollo once chased so heatedly that she had to get herself changed into a laurel tree—the daphne laureola—in order to escape him. The boy, of course, sees himself as Apollo. This part of the play brings "Candida" to mind—the mature but still attractive woman, the uninteresting but useful husband and the passionately headstrong young poet.

As happens in "The Cocktail Party," all the people of the new comedy keep meeting each other by coincidence until Mr. Bridie has finished his pleasant little story. This gives one time to relish the great charm of Miss Evans, whose first few minutes on the stage as a titled drunkardess are deftly and amusingly played, and whose subsequent behavior as a lost soul is touching. There also is time to enjoy the acting of the old man by Mr. Parker, who is so much like the late Dudley Digges that I felt last evening that the beloved and accomplished Dudley was with us again.

There are further nice performances by John Van Dreelen as the overwrought young man, Ernest Jay as a toff, Peter Williams as the suave butler who marries Lady Pitts when the old man kicks off, Martin Miller as a waiter and Mark Stone as a comic Sydney Greenstreet. I can only wish that my enthusiasm for the play itself could be more feverish, because so many others in the audience were really cheering.

The New York Times

September 19, 1950

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Edith Evans is a great actress, one may be excused for wishing that James Bridie's "Daphne Laureola" were a great play. After playing a full season in England, it opened at the Music Box last evening. But even with the presence of Miss Evans, who is ably abetted by Cecil Parker, "Daphne Laureola" is hardly more than a collection of odds and ends or a series of marginal notes. With his medical training to deepen his insight into human nature, Mr. Bridie would make a good essayist. But there is no denying that he rambles in the theatre.

The odds and ends include some practical scenes where fortunately Miss Evans can do some acting. She is cast as the middle-aged wife to a rich octogenarian, who is played by Mr. Parker. Although the ancient husband is happily settled in his ways, the wife is still rebellious. According to Mr. Bridie's plan, we see her first drinking alone and roundly soliloquizing in a restaurant. Next we see her as the genteel mistress of a luxurious home. In the last act, set six months after she had become a widow, she returns to the restaurant, this time married to a man considerably her junior.

* * *

If Miss Evans has been attracted to "Daphne Laureola" because the part is so varied, she is well within her rights. She is mistress of the stage, and plays with grace and style. Although her manner is warm and intimate, there is a touch of grandeur in her acting. For Miss Evans is an artist of the first quality. Whether she is tippling in solitude in a restaurant or presiding over her home with lady-like decorum or putting an absurd young man in his place with a forthright speech in the last act—Miss Evans is instinctively magnificent.

In fact, there is one memorable scene at the close of the second act when the octogenarian obligingly dies. From the theatrical point of view, it is old stuff in an easy tradition. But Mr. Parker is also an actor of subtleties and flavor, and Miss Evans is at her best in this scene with him—light, swift, radiant and deeply affecting.

* * *

Everyone in England knows Miss Evans' quality because she has acted many parts there. In New York we have seen her as Florence Nightingale in "The Lady in the Lamp," and as the nurse in Miss Cornell's production of "Romeo and Juliet." The latter was a rich, pungent, creative performance that brought a lusty character alive.

But Mr. Bridie's garrulous and rudderless comedy is below her level. Although Mr. Bridie makes some sagacious remarks occasionally and cracks a bright joke every now and then, his play is like the work of a talented amateur.

Under Murray Macdonald's direction, the performance is well designed and well timed. John Van Dreelen, as an overwrought Pole with romantic sensibilities, and Ernest Jay, as an affable eating companion, give excellent performances. There is some interesting scenery by Roger Furse and Roger Ramsdell. But "Daphne Laureola" is a shabby background for an actress of genius.

New York Herald Tribune

September 19, 1950

By HOWARD BARNES

Rich Portrayal

James Bridie's "Daphne Laureola," which has come to the Music Box from London, is a play of fugitive moods, dominated by a rich and buoyant portrayal. Were it not for Edith Evans as a matronly modern counterpart of the mythological nymph pursued by Apollo, it would have little more design than the knitting to which she industriously applies herself midway through the comedy. Her vital and beautifully modulated acting lends it a pervasive, if rarely cumulative charm. And in Cecil Parker she finds a knowing vis-a-vis for the author's random musings about a variety of matters. But even the stars have a hard time in keeping them captivating.

* * *

One may accept Bridie's opening situation far more easily than the resolution of his pasticcio of contrasting characters and emotional urges. In a piece of wonderfully bravura performing Miss Evans sits in lonely and bibulous grandeur in a Soho restaurant plucking memories and songs from her past and asking patrons of the joint to tea before a watchdog of a chauffeur packs her off to her Hampstead mansion. Even when the guests she disremembers arrive at her summer house, the drama has wit, substance and a certain poignance. Unfortunately a muted romance, in which a callow Polish youth becomes infatuated with a Daphne he prefers to call his Beatrice, is sticky and leads exactly nowhere.

* * *

The Shavian influence is very discernible in more than one passage of the work, as characters sound off in lengthy speeches, or a fading woman repulses the adoration of a stripling, but it does not sustain "Daphne Laureola." There is an amusing interlude in which the "persons" from the restaurant stumble into a baronet's seclusion and a touching moment when her octogenarian husband tells the lady of the title why he bought her for his wife. It is too bad that the author did not arrange the latter for his ending. As it is, a second meeting in Le Toit aux Porcs makes for strained drama and a want of satisfying entertainment.

* * *

However zig-zag the course of the action may be, Miss Evans remains serenely triumphant. The loneliness and frustration of a once-lovely creature pursued by wisps of dreams and seeking solace in brandy becomes immediate in her restrained and passionate characterization. Her attempts to project the meaning of the drama in words and gestures are almost always illuminating right through the limp climax. Parker is a tower of strength as a deaf and understanding old codger, but John Van Dreelen leaves much to be desired as the Polish lad who is smitten by a proud, middle-aged woman. Ernest Jay, Mark Stone and Joyce Linden are some of those who drop their h's during the slight complications of the plot. Murray Macdonald's staging is smooth enough and there are decorative settings. Miss Evans is the chief decoration of "Daphne Laureola."

Daily Mirror

September 19, 1950

'Daphne Laureola' Poor Play for Edith Evans

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Distinguished figures in our theatre have been returning from London this Summer with enthusiastic reports about Edith Evans in "Daphne Laureola." Last evening Leland Hayward and Herman Shumlin, in association with Laurence Olivier, gave us an opportunity to see them over at the Music Box.

We can understand their enthusiasm for the magnificent Miss Evans, but not for her vehicle. In penning "Daphne Laureola," James Bridie appears to have written a good role but a dull play. It is pretentious, obscure, too often static and only occasionally amusing or rewarding.

Incidentally, for a better understanding of "Daphne Laureola," you'd better take along your Bullfinch's "Mythology." There are frequent references to gods and goddesses, to celestial didoes and Olympian flora. But, clearing all that away, you have left a simple little story about a woman who married a wealthy and elderly baronet, had a nervous breakdown and sought compensation for her loneliness in alcohol.

While on an escapist spree in a restaurant, she meets a young Polish idealist who places her on a pedestal. But when her husband finally dies, it is her brawny, handsome chauffeur-nurse that she marries. Much of her frustration has vanished when next she meets the crushed idealist. She has decided that the world is preferable to the frigid peaks of Olympus.

We were fascinated by Miss Evans' skill and craftsmanship. While perhaps not a beauty in real life, on stage she creates beauty. She is certainly one of the great actresses of our times. We only wish the play were worthy of her fine talents. Cecil Parker is excellent as her venerable, understanding husband. Peter Williams, John Van Dreelen and Ernest Jay make the most of their opportunities.

Murray Macdonald's direction fails to clarify the script's confusions.

The players were not always audible, and we had difficulty in hearing some of the dialogue. This was due, in part, to the colds brought back from Summer vacations by many of the first-nighters.

Frankly, "Daphne Laureola" proved a disappointment for this Evans fan.